Fern Prairie Christmas
A Trio of Shirts

Reflections
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A wonderful photograph sent to me by my uncle Paul: my dad, Mahlon Hunt, on the left, me in the center, and Paul Hunt on the right. Dad was born in 1930, and Paul in 1937. I believe this was taken at Christmas around 1978, perhaps not long after Paul and Barbara were married—although Paul still had his beard, so I am not entirely certain. Barbara preferred kissing a clean-shaven face rather than a hairy one, and before long, that beard disappeared.

We are standing in the back bedroom of our Fern Prairie house. Behind us is my dad's collection of antique canning jars, stacked in careful rows along the shelves, the blue glass catching what little winter light found its way into the room. Dad is holding one of the purple coffee cups from a set of dishes my mother loved. I still have that set today. At the far left, the Christmas tree is partly hidden in the shadows, glowing as Christmas trees always seem to glow in old photographs—smaller, softer, and somehow farther away.

The room was part of one of the original sections of the house, which had belonged before us to the Brown family. Mr. Brown was in management at Crown Zellerbach. I went to school with Karen Brown in the first or second grade, and I can still remember my aunt Juanita driving the school bus and dropping her off there. Years later, my parents bought the place for a whopping $21,000 or thereabouts—about seven acres bordering the Fern Prairie grass airstrip.

That makes the photograph more emotional to look at now. The house and land are owned by the airport, absorbed into its continuing expansion, and the family home and much of the surrounding landscape are gone from us. But none of that had happened yet when this picture was taken. In that moment, we were simply standing together at Christmas, laughing hilariously in our matching shirts. I can only imagine that Barbara Strasburger gave them to us. Who else would have found three shirts quite like these?

And where are those shirts now? Probably somewhere at the bottom of the Snake River Canyon with Evel Knievel's Skycycle rocket—bright relics from an age when almost anything seemed possible, even flying across a canyon.

The house is gone from us, the jars are scattered, and everyone has moved on in one way or another. Yet the photograph gathers it all back together for one bright instant: three men in improbable shirts, laughing beneath a shelf of blue glass while the Christmas tree glows quietly at the edge of the room.

The room has vanished, but the best of times will always remain.